

C O N F I D E N T I A L SANAA 002820

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/20/2015

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SUBJECT: DCM HOSTS SMALL GROUP OF YEMENI JOURNALISTS TO DISCUSS RECENT VIOLENT INCIDENTS INVOLVING MEMBERS OF THE PRESS CORPS,

Classified By: AMB Thomas C. Krajeski for reasons 1.4 b and d.

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Ambassador met on September 20 with seven journalists, the DCM, two emboffs, and representatives of three European donor states at the home of the DCM to listen to members of the Yemeni press corps give voice to concerns in the wake of the recent incidents involving kidnapping, beating, and harassment of Yemeni journalists. The open discussion centered on journalists' perception that, where once they might find themselves in courts or prison for articles about corruption or criticism of the government, now their limits are less clear. They feel increasingly susceptible to an unpredictable fate at the hands of groups and individuals whose allegiance is unclear. The media representatives present invited donor states to increase pressure on the ROYG to safeguard press freedom and regretted that too often governments stress cooperation on counterterrorism over democratization and freedom of expression.

¶2. (C) Ambassador expressed his concern about recent incidents involving journalists and opened an off-the-record discussion by saying he was there to listen. Said Thabet, first deputy chairman of the Yemeni Journalists Syndicate summarized concerns saying that the increase in violence against the press corps comes from both state-funded organizations and the government. Khaled al Hamadi, correspondent for the vitriolic London-based Al Quds Al Arabi and himself a recent victim of a serious thrashing at the hands of at-large thugs, said that the latter demanded to know how much he was being paid to write and accused him of being an agent. (Note: This incident followed closely on the heels of his article about a military helicopter crash which charted a history of inadequate maintenance of Yemeni military equipment. End note) Mohamed Al Ghubari, who writes for several papers, noted that the current version of Yemen's draft press law is simply a rewrite, with minor revisions, of a 1990 law, which, all agreed, was so vague as to leave the door open to any interpretation. Al Ghubari speculated that a parliamentary review of the current draft offers the only chance for improvement in the bill and the Majlis Al Shurra seems capable only of outdated views of senior officials focused on the past.

¶3. (C) Jamal Amer, editor-in-chief of the independent weekly Al Wasat, who was also victimized recently after a critical article about corruption, invited donor states to increase pressure on the ROYG. Amer also asked for outside help on the draft press law and on investigation of violations of journalists' rights. He further urged the USG to raise these issues during President Saleh's planned November visit to Washington. Ambassador remarked that this concern is among the top three on an agenda which includes counterterrorism, economic reform, and democratic reform including press freedom. Nabil Al Sofi, editor-in-chief of the News Yemen website, felt that ROYG attention to media was excessive and out of proportion with the media's effectiveness. The DCM noted that professionalism among the press corps is uneven and needs overall improvement.

¶4. (C) Mohamed Jasser, editor-in-chief of the Ra'ay website recalled "a recent outage of forty-five websites for 6 to 10 hours" and noted that no reason had been offered for this interruption other than that it could be attributed to technical difficulties with a provider's site; however, several noted that the outages appeared to target only particular news websites. The British press officer Philip Boyle and the German cultural officer Henrick Selle added words of support; the presence of Dutch representative Stephanja Bork highlighted the long-standing efforts of the Dutch to improve the caliber of Yememi reporting.

¶5. (SBU) Comment: The frank discussion closed with media representatives calling upon donor states to actively support freedom of the press in Yemen and to offer more training to the local press corps.

Krajeski